DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 415 976 PS 026 159

AUTHOR Hines, Dorothy
TITLE The Acculturation of Jamaican Children in the American Educational System.
PUB DATE 1997-00-00
NOTE 14p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Acculturation; Cultural Background; Cultural Context; *Cultural Differences; Educational Environment; Elementary School Students; Elementary Secondary Education; Ethnic Groups; Foreign Countries; *Immigrants; Secondary School Students; *Student Adjustment; Student Attitudes; Teacher Attitudes; Teacher Role; Teacher Student Relationship
IDENTIFIERS Jamaica

ABSTRACT

Noting that in recent years there has been an increase in the number of West Indian immigrants to the United States, this paper discusses factors affecting the acculturation of Jamaican immigrant children in the American educational system, highlighting factors relating to poor performance of these immigrant children. The paper first provides an overview of the Jamaican educational system and reports data on the immigration of Jamaican families; the cultural background of the West Indies is also explored. The paper next compares the educational environment of schools in New York City and those in Jamaica, and discusses the culture shock Jamaican students experience in U.S. schools. The paper then describes a survey of ten teachers and several young adults who migrated from Jamaica to the United States as young children and are now successful in their chosen field. Subjects were surveyed about how they view the transition between cultures and what recommendations they would make. Survey respondents described how Jamaican students interact with teachers, compared these students with American peers, and considered difficulties in adjustment of Jamaican children. The paper concludes by noting that not enough is being done to address the needs of English-speaking Caribbean students and that transition services for both students and their parents would be beneficial. (JPB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ED 415 976

THE ACCULTURATION OF JAMAICAN CHILDREN IN THE AMERICAN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

Dorothy Hines

ABSTRACT

This paper is designed to highlight some of the contributing factors leading to children of Jamaican immigrants who "fall among thorns" in the American educational system.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Dorothy Hines
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

The shores of the United States have always been a haven for those seeking a a better way of living or refuge from political oppression. In fact one may quite safely say that this country was built by immigrants. Over the years many immigrant groups have come to this country seeking a better way of living. It is stated in a Caribbean Life editorial that "New York State is home to over three million immigrants, and immigrants and their children account for over 50 per cent of New York City's population". (Nov. 4, 1997 p.10)

As years have progressed, the nature and ethnicity of the immigrant groups have changed but the challenges remain. In recent years there has been an increase in the number of West Indian immigrants. West Indians have had a long history of migration to the United States. According to statistics from the Caribbean Research Council "42% of all immigrants

PS 026159

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

statewide are from the Caribbean , with an estimated 2 million in New York City alone. Jamaicans are the largest subgroup of Caribbean immigrants. Among these immigrants are many children. The New York City Board of Education states that "there are nearly 22,000 newly arrived children from the English speaking Caribbean. This figure accounts for those who have been here for three years or less."(1995, p. 26)

Background

Jamaica, a nation in the West Indies occupies the third largest island in the Caribbean Sea. The Arawak Indians, the first people known to inhabit the island, called it Xamayca, or "island of springs." Jamaica is the third largest island of the West Indies, after Cuba and Hispaniola. A British colony for approximately three centuries, Jamaica achieved its independence on August 6, 1962.

Jamaica's many ethnic groups contribute greatly to the country's rich cultural diversity. The original Amerindians (Arawaks) have long since disappeared, and the present population is composed of descendants of immigrants, mainly African slaves. Over 90% of the more than 2 million people are of African or African and European descent. English is the country's official language. Nevertheless, most Jamaicans speak a Creole derived from English, French, Spanish and African languages

The English-speaking people from the Caribbean are bound by history, language, custom, and the pattern of their immigration to the United States"(Warren J. Halliburton, 1994 p. 15). Like their Black American brothers and sisters, the people of the Caribbean share a common history of forced separation from their motherland. West Indians are of African, Indian, Spanish and other European descent. European colonial powers

ruled the Caribbean for many years after its "discovery" by Columbus in 1942. In 1804 Haiti became the regions first independent country. Cuba and the Dominican Republic also gained independence in the nineteenth century. The anti-colonial movement of the 1960's triggered freedom for almost all of the region beginning with Jamaica's and Trinidad and Tobago's independence in 1962 three years afterFidel Castro's take over of Cuba in 1959. Today there are only a few that have chosen not to be self governing. Although West Indians are multilingual (Dutch, English, French Creole, Spanish), English is the dominant language of the region. This English is interspersed with French Dutch or Spanish words, phrases and forms. Patois (Creole) is spoken in all present and former British colonies.

Overview of the Jamaican Educational System

Elementary School Education (4 1/2 - 11 years.)

The Jamaican educational system is modeled on the British system. In an educational report written by the Ministry of Education, Kingston , Jamaica in 1974, it was implied that a "delay in developing a system of education suited to our needs is to be attributed to our long colonial experience during which something 'pseudo' was obtained. The system was never planned for all of Jamaica's children". (Ministry of Education, 1974,p.7) The children of the wealthy had the privilege of attending preschool, primary and high schools of the best quality.

As a teacher in the Jamaican Educational system for over two decades, I saw drastic changes in the system. The inception of the Education Act of 1955, opened the floodgates for the children of the poorer class to get a high school education. This was a bloodless social revolution. The Education Act introduced the Common Entrance

Examination to the island. Children were prepared to sit this examination at age 101/2. This exam is a timed, high pressured one, with students being tested in Reading, Mathematics and Reasoning. Additional lessons are given after school and in some cases weekends, to ensure that students are successful in what is a highly competitive examination that ensures a free place to a high school.

There are many outstanding performances in this examination and this creates another problem. In Jamaica a U.N.E.S.C.O report on the development of Secondary Schools in 1983 found that only 23.4 % of those eligible for admission to high schools were provided the opportunity to do so. The remaining children who were not given a place in High School had not failed the examination but were placed in Secondary schools because this was the only alternative. This has brought extreme frustration to both parent and children and efforts are now being made to change this system. The proposal of eliminating the Common Entrance Examination is now in consideration.

Pre-School Education - Basic Schools (4 - 51/2 - 6 years.)

It is significant that pre-school education be mentioned. The importance of a good start to the intellectual life of an individual, is widely recognized and practiced in Jamaica. Many of these Basic schools are operated by the Churches or by private individuals. Some are qualified, and some are not. In 1974 , the Ministry of Education in Jamaica set up a Committee to bring most , if not all of these school under the umbrella of the Education Department.

Certain recommendations were made to ensure a better education for all the children in the three to six age range. Some of these

recommendations included "a scheme of pre-service education for teachers of infants. This in service training should be vigorously continued along such lines as have been developed by the University of the West Indies."(Min. of Ed. 1974, p. 32)

Immigration of Jamaican Families.

The Immigration and Naturalization Services data on United States of America immigrants for 1985 indicated that immigrants from Jamaica who entered in 1985 numbered 18,923. Of this number 9,193 (48.6%) settled in New York, while others spread over other parts of the United States (1985, p. 1). The Caribbean Research Council has indicated that "Jamaica's population of 2.5 million is the largest in the English speaking Caribbean. An additional 2.5 million live outside of the island. This explains why there are more Jamaicans than any other islanders in the United States, Britain and Canada".(Caribbean Voice 1995, p. 26)

Jamaican students also make up the largest group of West Indian immigrant students. Parents usually come first while the children are left in the care of a relative, frequently a grandparent, aunt, or a friend. Migration is usually viewed by the family as an opportunity for advancement and so there is usually full support given to the migrating parent.

Sometimes children are separated from their parents for years, with contact being maintained through phone calls, and the sending of money, clothing and food to the caregiver and extended family. Brook Larmer and Knolly Moses of Kingston, Jamaica refers to these children as the "barrel children". A large percentage of these children face many problems. "Many of these children unsupervised at home, are victims of

circumstance, but not all of them remain so innocent. Children with such freedom at home have a hard time going to school, and accepting its rules".(B. Larmer, Feb. 19, 1996 p.45).

The writers of this article postulated that unlike the "street urchins" who roam many Third World cities, barrel children are virtually invisible to the broader society. Parents usually keep them fed and clothed by sending barrels and cash a few times a year. Wealthier parents sometimes give their kids portable telephones so they can do what's known as "mothering by cellular". (Newsweek, Feb. 19, 1996).When these children eventually join their parents in the United States of America, they are faced with adjustment problems.

On the other hand there are families that migrate together. In many instances the initial period can be very traumatic. There are many horror stories of parents having to do menial jobs in order to survive. In many instances professionals who were able to command a certain level of respect in their homeland, have to resort to jobs well below their ability in order to make a living. Some like myself try to acquire the necessary qualification in order to be employed in respective occupations to be able to make a better life for ourselves and our children. This will result sometimes in children receiving sub-standard care, during their school years as parents work and attend school in order to achieve their career goals.

Acculturation.

Comparison of New York and Jamaican Schools.

Jamaican students bring to the New York City school system a culture which is dramatically different from the culture of New York City. This brings untold hardships and traumatic experiences to children

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

adjusting to the New York Schools.

The educational institutions in Jamaica are to a large extent fashioned from the British system which is more rigid and structured. Schools in Jamaica are usually more spread out, most times around a central courtyard in comparison to the opposing structures of New York. Fonda Lloyd in an article on the adjustment of English Speaking Caribbean students in the American educational system, quoted Roxanne Warner as saying "to many kids who come from the Caribbean, the New York school system looks like a six-storied monster with black iron doors"(Nov. 1984, p. 17)

In Jamaica, classrooms are a lot smaller, students stay in class and the teachers change rooms. Children are accustomed to starting each school day with praying at a general assembly, and a reminder of the school rules .In the Jamaican classrooms strict discipline is maintained and absolute quiet is usually demanded. This is especially so in overcrowded classrooms where participation is kept to a minimum, if not altogether discouraged. Unlike their American peers, Jamaican children are physically punished by their teachers. Many find it difficult to adjust to the more liberal and democratic atmosphere found in most American schools.

One area that cannot be ignored is the issue of race. In Jamaica blacks are the majority population. Consequently the majority of children are accustomed to having a black teacher. For some children having a white teacher is therefore a totally new experience and they sometimes encounter difficulties with this.

Everybody's magazine quoted Doctor Obebe as saying teachers in the Caribbean school system "are revered and considered as

leaders in a community. Parents place their children in the teachers' hands and expect that they become surrogate mothers and fathers. In addition to all this the teacher's role also consists of providing guidance and assistance in disciplinary matters. If students are not prepared for a class they get flogged by the teachers and then again when they get home"(F. Lloyd 1984 p. 17)

The differences in the roles of teachers in the two cultures often leads to a breakdown in communication between Jamaican parents and American teachers. It is very common to hear school personnel complain that West Indian(which includes Jamaican) parents do not care, because the parents expect the teacher to take a very active role in the education of their children. On the other hand one will also quite frequently hear parents accuse teachers of not caring.

For the Jamaican child entering the New York school system it can be a real "culture shock". The experiences of Jamaican children is as diverse as the children themselves. Some are able to assimilate and do remarkably well while others don't. Is there a secret formula to success? What can be done to ensure the success of more children.

What teachers can do to be helpful.

In order to get a clear feeling of how teachers view the transition between cultures and what recommendation they would make, a survey was distributed to ten teachers. In addition interviews were done with young adults who migrated from Jamaica to the United States as young children and are successful in their chosen field. The ten teachers interviewed had years of experience ranging from as low as two to as high as twenty - five years. They worked in private as well as public schools.

The survey of teachers revealed the following:

(1) In describing how Jamaican students interact with their teachers, on the whole they are described as well mannered but shy.

(2) Teachers favorably compare the performance of Jamaican students with that of their American peers. Most of the teachers said they do very well in standardized tests although they showed a weakness in Language skills

(3) Here are some of the difficulties mentioned in the adjustment of Jamaican children to the American Educational system. One teacher mentioned getting accustomed to going from classroom to classroom for different subjects. Two mentioned the students getting accustomed to the American accent, and the teachers getting accustomed to the students Jamaican accent. This they say attributes to the students poor or no participation in class. Students also have a difficult time adjusting to the variations in climate, having grown accustomed to a perpetual summer.

(4) Some of the recommendations given to help in the transition of the Jamaican child to the American educational system are:

(a) having transitional classes for the students

(b) teachers who are of Jamaican background should form support groups for the students and parents

(c) teachers should make themselves knowledgeable of the Jamaican culture as well as other cultures that may exist in their classes and make provisions for these in the school's curriculum

One of the teachers a special education teacher, mentioned that provisions are made for the assimilation of students from the French or Spanish speaking Caribbean. There are bilingual classes that are designed

to assist these students. No provision is made for the English speaking Caribbean children (this includes Jamaicans), despite the transitional difficulties they experience in the schools. This has led to serious failure of many students as they are referred to and placed in Special Education classes.

Conclusion

Emigration to a new culture or environment can lead to stress as the individual seeks to adjust and assimilate in a new culture. America has a history to welcoming the immigrant, and has in many instances gone to great lengths to assist certain groups in assimilating as painlessly as possible.

For the Jamaican immigrant there has been a long history of immigration to the United States. Research indicates that as the poorer people have had the opportunity to emigrate the problems they experience in the school system have become serious indeed. For many years this was ignored because it was felt and known that children from Jamaica and other West Indian islands usually excelled in school. But what about those who were not being provided the opportunity to succeed? What about the hundreds who are being unfairly placed in special education classes? What programs are being created to assist students to adjust to a system that was totally foreign?

Research, literature and reports from teachers and parents indicate not enough is being done to address the needs of English speaking Caribbean students. As suggested in the research there is a strong need for more transitory services for these children. Those who work with Jamaican

students need to have a better understanding of their culture and history. They need to be aware of what talents these students possess and from there they can build on those talents.

Parents need to become familiar with the system and adjust their mentality where necessary as a part of learning to function in a different society, that may view the role of the teacher differently. Without a concerted effort by parents, teachers and community leaders to address the needs of this population there will be a continued waste of many capable young lives.

Eugene Garcia in the conclusion of her research on the education of Hispanics in Early Childhood stated the importance of respect for other cultures when she said "be an advocate for our linguistically and culturally diverse children and families by nurturing, celebrating and challenging them. they do not need our pity for what they do not have; they, like any individual and family, require our respect and the use of what they bring as a resource"(March 1997, p.12)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Clarke,V. (1989). Adjustment of Caribbean Immigrants in New York. Educational Dimensions New York Caribbean Research Center

Garcia, E. (1997). Education of Hispanics in Early Childhood:of Roots and Wings. Young Children, 52, (3), 5-13.

Hohn, G. (1995). Focus of Concern: Caribbean Children. The Caribbean Voice. 2, (5), 26-27.

Hinds, L (1996). (January 5-11). Most Caribbean Students Attend Public Schools. Jamaica Weekly Gleaner. p 24.

Larmer, B. (1996 December). The Barrel Children. Newsweek. p45.

Lloyd, F. (1984). New York City Public Schools: the Traumas Within. English Speaking Caribbean Students Find Trouble to Adjust. Everybody's.8.(7). 16-19

Educating the masses. Ministry of Education Bulletin. Kingston Jamaica 1974.

QUESTIONAIRE

School Private Public

(1) Years of teaching experience?

(2) Grade currently teaching?

(3) Are there children from Jamaica in your class?

(4) How do they interact with their teachers?

(5) How do they interact with their classmates?

(6) How do you compare their performance with that of other students?

(7) Have you observed any particular strengths or weaknesses in children from Jamaica?

(8) How would you evaluate their performance on standardized tests?

(9) What difficulties do children from Jamaica have in adjusting to the American school system?

(10) Based on your experience, what recommendations would you make to assist in the transition of the Jamaican child to the American school system?